

Life Through the Lens

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[0 : 00] As we're going through the book of Ecclesiastes, one thing that struck me about it, it is a very visual book. You can imagine someone making a documentary film about it. So in chapter one, for instance, there's the rhythm of nature, which you could film.

In chapter three, there's the thoughts about time that we looked at a couple of weeks ago, and there's a time for this and a time for that, and you could easily film that. And throughout the book, there are little vignettes, little wee stories, incidents like the story of the kings at the end of the chapter that we read today, which could be really brought to life on film.

Perhaps if the writer of Ecclesiastes had been living today rather than writing a book, he would have made a short documentary film about it. This thought occurred to someone at the Gospel Coalition, and they had some fun listing 13 films that bring us some of the characteristics and themes of the book of Ecclesiastes.

So for instance, they included Forrest Gump, which illustrates that power and intelligence are not the same as wisdom. They're searching for Bobby Fischer, which is all about the ruthlessness that people feel you need to get on in our world.

No country for old men. A brutal murderer is involved in a car accident and escapes unscathed, illustrating the injustice that people often see in our world.

[1 : 27] The greatest showman, great success, doesn't necessarily need dissatisfaction and peace in life. Or the man who planted trees, someone who goes with the rhythm of life and of nature, and who turns a barren wasteland into a thriving community over a period of many years.

Films that illustrate something of the book of Ecclesiastes and also tell us just how relevant it is today in our society. I must admit, I'm not a cinema goer.

None of these films are really very familiar to me, but I do watch television. And so as a bit of a hook for the points I'm going to make today, I'm going to link them into television programs. And it's the titles of the program rather than the content that will be important.

We'll come to that in just a second. Maybe worth, though, taking just a couple of minutes to remind ourselves about the book of Ecclesiastes Ecclesiastes and how we should approach it as we read it.

Ecclesiastes is the observation of someone who calls himself the teacher. Perhaps it's Solomon. And the teacher is a grumpy old man. He's been through life. He's done everything.

[2 : 37] He's had power. He's had wealth. He's had wine, woman, and song. And he's found that it's all, really from his point of view, just been a waste of time. He said it's like a vapor.

It's like the steam that comes out of a kettle and a few seconds later it's gone and it's forgotten about. It's meaningless, is what the teacher says.

He's really become the ultimate cynic. And when we read the book of Ecclesiastes, it's very important that we don't read it like we might read Romans or Isaiah.

It is not all stuff that is instruction for us and the role to take literally. It is poetry. And it is particularly, it is a view from under the sun in most of it.

So it is someone who is looking at life and not looking at it through the lens of a Christian faith or a real deep understanding of God. It is someone who is looking at life from a human perspective and finding it is sadly wanting.

[3 : 40] Now that's not to say that it isn't inspired scripture. It is. And the writer of Ecclesiastes brings out many things, much wisdom that we can look at and we say, yes, that resonates with me.

I can see that in our world today. And he also has an understanding of a God who is the creator and who is ultimately in control.

And that if we are to enjoy really fulfilled lives, then we can only do it with a knowledge of him and by looking to him for guidance.

And in chapter four, the writer of Ecclesiastes moved on from looking at him as an individual to looking at society. What are the things that drive us in society?

What are the things that you look at in society and think, well, that's a waste of time or that really doesn't ring true? And there are four key things that I think he brings out.

[4 : 39] So here we come to the first of my television programs, which is casualty. And the writer says, we are all casualties of life. That's what he's saying in the first verse or two.

Verse one, again, I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter.

He looks at society around about him and he says, it's just not fair. And most of us are casualties of life. There are people who have power and they abuse it.

And they have no concern for those who are further down the chain and who just live lives of suffering and often lives of misery. Now, I think perhaps to some extent we can identify with that. We can certainly look around our world, the world that Charles was praying for earlier, and think about situations where people, through no fault of their own, are in terrible circumstances and are enduring terrible oppression.

[5 : 40] So there is wisdom in what the writer has to say here. A lot of people in our world today feel overwhelming oppression. They feel that they are casualties of a system that is unfair and of people who are cruel and brutal.

If we can identify with what the writer says in verse one, I wonder about the next two verses. They seem rather extreme, don't they? He says, I think people who have died are happier than people who are alive.

And I don't think he's thinking particularly of people having gone to heaven and being happy. It's just they're out of this world and they put all the evils and the oppression of this world behind them. And he says, even better is if you're never born.

So actually, the whole of life is futile. Now, I'm sure a lot of people in this world might feel that at times, but that is not a Christian, it's not a biblical view if we look at the Bible as a whole.

Life is a gift from God. We should treasure it and we should rejoice in it, despite all the difficulties that we face in life.

[6 : 48] So the teacher is using hyperbole, I guess, here. He is exaggerating for effect. But the point is, I think, is well made. For many people, life is really difficult and at times they find it a real struggle to go on.

And the point, too, is that in our world, there is a huge amount of injustice. That there is a huge amount of people in positions of power who don't care about anyone else and who make decisions that have radical effects on the lives of others and it just washes over them despite the misery that they're causing.

And most of the wars in many countries of our world, that is certainly true. And like the writer to Ecclesiastes, we should have a real concern for social justice.

I would say that if I'm a Christian and I don't have a concern for social justice, then my theology is severely deficient. Because the Bible is full of those who talk out against the injustices in society, particularly in the prophets, but also the Lord Jesus.

He had a real concern for those who were at the bottom of the pile in society, those who were poor, those who were ill, those who were friendless. And he was not afraid to speak out against those who would oppress them, particularly the religious leaders and the way that they treated the ordinary people.

[8 : 20] We as Christians should have a real concern for those who are poor and those who are oppressed and a desire to help them. That doesn't mean we have to join Amnesty International, become politicians, but in the place where we are, we should be making a stand for social justice and we should be doing all we can to help those who are going through these difficult times.

I think it's really important as a church that we have things like Basics Bank and the Care Van and we support the Fairly Well Youth Project and other things which take those who have been dealt what might appear a fairly raw hand in life and we introduce them to the love of the Lord Jesus and we really care for them and try to help them.

Christians should have a desire for social justice, should be working towards it and should recognise that for many people life is overwhelming and they feel really oppressed. The teacher is right, even if his final conclusion isn't right, and we should be concerned about that. Then the writer moves on, and I'm illustrating the next point, with pointless. Because he talks about something that he thinks is pointless. I've also called it senseless success. And this is people who spend all their life trying to get more and more money and to be more and more successful, and they can look back at the end and say, well, what's the point been? [9 : 48] A particular illustration of a man who's got no family, no son, no father, no one to pass things on to, no brother, and yet he works and works away and accumulates more and more, and he looks back at the end and says, I could have been enjoying life.

I could really have been living a fulfilled life, but I haven't. And the writer says, at least part of the reason for why this kind of thing happens is that we're always trying to be better than other people. So in verse 4, he talks about the envy that leads to achievement. About people who look at others and say, I want to be like them. I want to be more successful than they are. And it drives them on, and they lose all the value in life. They lose all balance in their life because they are so driven by this ambition.

And the writer says, that's meaningless. It's like chasing the wind. You're not getting anything really worthwhile in life if you're just driven by being more and more successful or by being wealthy far beyond what you could ever need.

[10 : 57] And he says there's a balance to be struck. On the one hand, you've got the fool who folds his arms and does nothing and isn't interested in working. And the writer certainly isn't recommending that that's what we should do.

But he says the other side, you've got the person for whom having things in one hand would actually be enough. But they use both hands. They want both hands to be full. And they just drive themselves forward.

And they forget all about the enjoyment and the satisfaction that God wants us to have in life because they just want to accumulate more and more for themselves.

Neither extreme is good. We should work if we're able to, and that is part of God's purpose for us in life. That we shouldn't work to the extent that we forget about what God's real purpose for us in life is.

That we should enjoy him. That we should know his presence. And that we should be able to live in harmony with others and to help them rather than trying to get ahead of them.

[12 : 02] There's a real stupidity in some people who just feel, I must get more and more. I must work harder and harder to achieve more and more. And ultimately, they're just driving themselves to the grave.

They're not doing themselves any good. So what is the right way? Well, Paul in 1 Timothy gives some very helpful instructions to the young man he's writing to.

He says, Godliness with contentment is great gain. We brought nothing into the world. We can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap. And into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. I challenge you and I challenge myself this morning. What is our attitude towards money?

[13 : 00] And what is our attitude towards what the world might see as success? Do we live lives where we're trying more and more to accumulate for ourselves, to be more successful, to be wealthier, to be more powerful, whatever it is, in the terms of this world?

Or do we have what Paul describes as godliness with contentment? Being really thankful for all that God has given us, making sure that we contribute fully in our lives, through our work or through our interactions with others, and that through it we glorify God.

Or are we getting too caught up in the things of this world and too much thinking of ourselves? On Friday, a very good friend of mine passed away.

Jim McClellan was a builder, a very successful builder, down in Peebles. Among other things, he built the hall, which many of our young men are preaching in over the coming weeks. He was very involved too in missionary work in Scotland, in supporting missionaries.

Jim, although he was very successful throughout his life, he had a focus on serving the Lord Jesus. And he retired from commercial business at a relatively early age, and he spent the next few years building Challenge House, which is just off Junction 16 of the M8 in Glasgow.

[14 : 24] Challenge House, for over 25 years, has provided low-cost accommodation for a number of Christian organisations, Echos International, Tier Fund Care, and a number of others.

And the proceeds, the rent that came in from that, Jim has put into a trust, and it is used to provide funds for missionaries and for mission organisations like Scripture Union.

Jim was a man who wasn't a great public speaker. He wouldn't hear him on a platform like this. But he was a man who was totally focused on serving the Lord Jesus, on working for him, and who had his priorities right, even though he was a good businessman, even though he was very successful in what he did.

That wasn't what drove him. What drove him was his love for the Lord Jesus and his desire that the gospel should be spread. Am I like that?

Are you like that? What is our real purpose in life? What is it that drives us and that gives us the greatest motivation in our life? It should be following the Lord Jesus and being content with what we've been given by God and using that for his glory.

[15 : 38] So that was the pointlessness, the senseless success that many people strive for in our world. Third television programme is It Takes Two, and that is the spin-off from Strictly Come Dancing.

And I thought that was quite a good description of verses 9 to 12 of this chapter. I also called it Tougher Together. Two people are a lot stronger than one person, is the key theme here.

So the writer takes us through a number of situations. You're working. Perhaps you're thinking about manual labour. It's a lot easier and you achieve a lot more if there are two of you than if you're working just by yourself.

If one becomes tired, then the other can help them, and working together, they can achieve a great deal. Or then you might have people going for a walk.

If you're going walking, if you're travelling, it's a lot better in many ways if there are two of you.

There's companionship. There's help. And again, if one of you is tired, the other can support them.

[16 : 44] If you fall down, if you have an accident, then there's someone there to help you. Two are better than one. He pictures two people lying down together, perhaps a married couple in a bed.

He's saying, if there are one person, you might be shivering away all night if you've not got much heating in the room. It's a cold night. If there are two of you, you can keep each other warm. And then the final example he gives is someone who is being attacked, and he says, well, one person by themselves can't really defend themselves very successfully.

It's a lot easier and a lot better if there are two of you. Two are better than one. And then at the end, this picture of the cord of three strands, the rope that is twisted together, the three strands in it, and the three strands together are a lot stronger than one or than two, or indeed than the total of the three if they were separate.

Now, sometimes this is used in an illustration. You and me and Jesus is a lot stronger than me or the two of us together. Now, I don't think there's anything wrong with that illustration, but I don't think it's the key point he's making here.

He is just making the point that the more people there are working together, the more can be achieved. Now, as we said, we are living in an increasingly individualistic society.

[18 : 04] We are much less in contact with others and communicating with others in a meaningful way than people have been in the past.

We're on our phones or we're on our apps or whatever. We communicate electronically rather than face-to-face. And we lose some of the social interaction that is valuable, that is helpful, that is essential in life.

As a church, as Christians, we must make sure that is not the case with us. We talked about small groups here and I was really pleased with what we said because it ties in really well with this theme. Small groups are a place where we can get to know each other, where we can support each other, and we can show that together as we bring our request to God, as we challenge one another, perhaps as we encourage one another, then we are much stronger than we are as a group of individuals.

Paul has this picture in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 of the church as a body. There's arms, there's legs, there's eyes, and so on. And together the parts make much more, together the whole makes much more than the sum of the individual parts.

[19 : 18] A body functioning well is much more than just a collection of different organs. It is a unified being that is able to serve and to do what is right and to bring real enjoyment in life.

As a church, it is really important that we support one another, that we are there for one another, that we build one another up in our faith and in our knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

And sometimes that will be in twos. One-to-ones are quite a common feature in our church and a really valuable one. People meeting together perhaps to read the Bible and to pray together and to support one another.

We have the small groups, we have various other fellowship groups, and all of them help us as a group of God's people to be stronger together and to face up to the trials of life in a way that helps us as we rely on the Lord Jesus.

We are tougher together. And then there's the closing verses of the chapter, and I think there was only one program we could say for that. It's Game of Thrones. This is all about power plays.

[20 : 27] It is about people who want to be in control of things and it illustrates very well the transient nature of power. Now these verses are quite difficult to translate, and different translations do it in different ways.

I think the simplest way to look at it is the way the NIV does it. There are two kings. Some translations suggest there are three. There are two kings. One king is old. He's been in power for a long time, and he's reached the stage which a lot of these kind of rulers do where he's not willing to listen to anyone else.

He's clinging on to power, and he's not concerned about anyone else, and he just wants to keep that authority in his life. He doesn't know, says the writer, how to heed a warning.

Now we could look, probably look at your own country, but certainly look in other countries at rulers like that. Robert Mugabe, for instance, might have been quite a good example of that kind of king.

And he's lost the confidence of his people, but he's clinging on to power.

You then have the second king who starts out as a young man, and he comes through really difficult circumstances. So the writer says, well, he may have been in prison. He may have risen from poverty.

[21 : 41] So here we have someone who's actually done something, achieved something, and through his own efforts and through the desire to better himself, he's got to the position where he succeeds to the kingship.

And the people must be thinking, wonderful. We've got rid of this old king who was holding us back and who wouldn't listen to anyone else. We've got this wonderful new king and he appears very wise and very willing to listen to others.

This is a great situation to be in. But then a few years down the line, the new king has lost the respect of the people. He may have been quite a good king, but further through familiarity or because he's got a bit complacent, at the end of it, the people were not pleased with him.

He got into the same situation as the old king and soon he would be gone and perhaps forgotten about. And the writer says, isn't this meaningless? Why should this young man have spent so long getting the position of power and then at the end of it, it's all just wasted?

And that is realistic in life as well, isn't it? You look back through history and you see rulers come and rulers go. Some of them, we remember their names, perhaps a bit about what they did, but actually they've gone and they're largely forgotten about.

[23 : 03] And it's not just in nations that these kinds of things happen. In churches, you get people who try to hang on too long, elders who are too slow in being willing to step down and pass the reins on. And then other people come in and people really think they're good for a while and then they go off them.

And it's not much different from what the writer describes here. Human power, human influence is very transient. It's there for a while and then it's gone.

And so we need to look at the Bible and we need to look at the one who has eternal power.

Remember the verses in Isaiah where Isaiah is looking forward to the birth of the Lord Jesus, the wonderful counselor, mighty God who'd be coming into the world.

And he says, of the greatness of his governance, government and peace, there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord almighty will accomplish this. We have a king who is wise and who is unchanging.

[24 : 16] And we can depend on him throughout our lives and for an eternal future. And he's not like the kings of this world who perhaps grow a bit funny in their old age or want to cling on to power.

He has eternal power and he will rule with total righteousness. As we look at the injustices and the problems in the world round about it, it should be a great encouragement that we have an eternal king, an all-wise king and one who ultimately will be seen to be in authority, will be the king of kings and lord of lords.

So that's Ecclesiastes 4. Overwhelming oppression, senseless success, tougher together and power plays. What could we say to sum it up?

So I think like most of Ecclesiastes, what we learn is that the conventional wisdom of this world doesn't really lead to satisfaction in life. Success in this world often arises from trying to win over others, from trying to get one up over other people and working ourselves into the grave and being very unsatisfied at the end.

Wealth, power, even hard work by themselves don't bring any satisfaction. And the writers of Ecclesiastes would say to us, the way to true wisdom is through God.

[25 : 45] It's not by thinking, I know everything, I can do everything. It's by recognizing that only in our relationship with God and by living in the kind of rhythm of life that he has established for us, can we have true satisfaction.

And if we go beyond what the writer of Ecclesiastes could have understood, we can look at the New Testament and we can see what that teaches us about wisdom. At the earlier service this morning, we read from 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

I want to come back to that as we close. 1 Corinthians chapter 1 is about human wisdom and about God's wisdom. And it says that the central event in history, the central thing which Christians look to the cross of the Lord Jesus, to those in the world around about us, it looks really stupid.

How could you have a Messiah who ends up being crucified in the cruelest way by the Romans and whose life appears to end in failure?

Paul says it's a stumbling block to the Jews because they saw anyone who hanged on a tree as being cursed. It's foolishness to the Gentiles because they just couldn't understand how this apparent weakness had any kind of strength or wisdom to it.

[27 : 03] But, says Paul, for us, for those who know God, it's the power of God and it's the wisdom of God.

The cross of the Lord Jesus is the thing which demonstrates above all else the meaning of life and what it means to have wisdom in life.

God took all our failure, all our sins, all our shame, he heaped them on his son. Jesus took the penalty for us so that we could have a relationship with God so that we could know the God of heaven in a way the writer of Ecclesiastes never could and so that we could have real peace and real satisfaction in our lives.

And as we look through whatever lens we have on life, then we should be looking at it through the lens of the Lord Jesus and of what he has done and of who he is.

No one had anything like the wisdom of the Lord Jesus, not Solomon, not anyone else. And that wisdom, as I said, is particularly displayed. It is death for us on the cross.

[28 : 12] Let's go out this week and focus on that. Focus on the Lord Jesus, on living for him, on following him, on godliness with contentment. And if what I've been saying is a bit alien to you and you don't really understand, a lot of it, please speak to myself or to Alistair at the end if you would like to know more about the Lord Jesus and about what the cross at Calvary should mean for us.

Let's live lives of real wisdom, not lives that are characterized by selfishness or by a desire to be one up on others. And let's do it together as a church, as a group of God's people that we can support one another and encourage each other as we seek to serve the Lord whom we love.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to us. We thank you for the wisdom that there is in this book of Ecclesiastes for the way that it rings true to life.

But we thank you for how much more we know through the Lord Jesus. And we thank you that through his cross we can see finally the wisdom of God and how that is so much greater than human wisdom.

Help us all to understand it and to have our faith in Jesus. And help us as a group of your people to be stronger together, to encourage and build each other up, whether in our small groups or in individual relationships, that we may be those who support one another, who function well together as a body and who have a real joy together in the Lord Jesus.

[29 : 48] We thank you for your presence. We commit ourselves to you in Jesus' name. Amen.